

Iraqi Shiites push for Islamic republic

Tod Robberson

The Dallas Morning News (KRT)

KARBALA, Iraq — In Shiite Islam's holiest city, a seemingly unstoppable movement is afoot to turn postwar Iraq into an Islamic republic resembling the one that has ruled neighboring Iran for the past 24 years, much to Washington's displeasure.

Newly liberated Iraqi Shiites, who have gathered this week in Karbala by the millions for an important pilgrimage, say there can be no turning back from the course they have chosen to establish a new Islamic republic of Iraq.

They describe the new republic as a place where Islamic law, or sharia, would be strictly enforced. Women, whether Muslim or Christian, would be urged to wear a head-to-toe cloak known as an

abaya. There would be democracy but also a socialist-style economic system based on equal distribution of wealth.

A supreme Islamic council, known as the Hawza al-Ilmiyya, would have to approve everything from garbage collection to homeland security. In fact, the supreme council already is doing so, Shiite clerics say, noting that Iraqi hospitals, mosques and public buildings already are being guarded by armed men appointed under Hawza authority.

If Washington thought it had problems on its hands with the government of former leader Saddam Hussein, it has yet to contend with 14 million Iraqi Shiites whose aspirations for self-styled governance have been foiled for 35 years by Hussein's harsh dictatori-

al rule. Now that Hussein has been ousted, they say, there will be no turning back, regardless of what Washington wants.

Iraqis appear oblivious to the fact that an American, retired lieutenant general Jay Garner, arrived on Monday to take up the post of civilian administrator for Iraq. They describe the idea of an American running Iraqi affairs as ludicrous and impossible.

"If I could choose a government, it would be the Hawza," said Abbas al-Jabouri, 24, a mechanics student from Baghdad. "We are all soldiers for the Hawza. We will do as they command." A man behind him declared that Jabouri spoke for all of them, and the crowd shouted in agreement.

"We will never accept a govern-

ment imposed from outside. It must be a government elected from inside by the Iraqi people. God will, if America doesn't interfere, we will have an Islamic democracy," said Shiite cleric Sayyed Naona al-Hussein.

The United States is welcomed to assist in the formation of this new system, the Shiites say, but it will be a government of Iraqis' choosing, and once it is formed, U.S. troops will no longer be welcomed in their country. If the troops don't leave, Shiites warn, there will be confrontation on a massive scale.

"It's up to them. It depends on what the Americans have in mind. Did they come to liberate Iraq or occupy it?" said Naji Karim, a pilgrim who arrived in Karbala on Monday morning after a three-day

walk from Baghdad.

Although Shiites are in the minority across the Muslim world, they comprise about 60 percent of Iraq's population. Nevertheless, they have been ruled for the past 35 years by Sunni Muslims loyal to Hussein, a fact that has been a longtime source of tension not only internally but also with Shiite-ruled Iran.

"The Americans absolutely must consult the Hawza" before attempting to organize a government," Jabouri said. "There is no government without the Hawza. The Hawza is and always has been our government."

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EPA says common chemical may harm people

Seth Borenstein

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WASHINGTON — A common industrial chemical used in making Teflon, Gore-Tex and hundreds of other products seems to cause deaths, birth defects and developmental problems in rats and could harm people, federal officials said April 14.

In an unprecedented move, the Environmental Protection Agency announced that it is intensifying a study of the common chemical — perfluorooctanoic acid, known as PFOA — to see how much risk it poses and what should be done about it.

PFOA helps give consumer products protection from fire, stains and water.

Products containing PFOA include nonstick cookware and protective finishes on carpets and clothing. Other applications are scattered throughout the aerospace, construction, automobile, chemical processing, electronics and textile industries, the EPA said.

PFOA is found in Americans' blood in low levels, according to three studies. It stays in human blood for more than four years. Even so, many scientific uncertainties remain, and it is premature for people to worry or stop using everyday products containing the chemical, said Stephen Johnson, EPA's assistant administrator for toxic substances.

One major uncertainty: The EPA doesn't know how PFOA gets into people. People don't eat PFOA products, Johnson said.

"The EPA has not determined whether PFOA (is) an unreasonable risk to the public," Johnson said.

The EPA is looking into two PFOA issues. First, some products such as Teflon are made in a process using PFOA but don't contain PFOA in their composition; even so, they might pose risks. Other products, including stain and grease repellents, contain chemicals called fluorinated telomers. Technically these are not PFOA, but over time they break down into PFOA.

PFOA has been studied several times, starting in 1961, according to environmental groups, but it was a 2002 rat study by the chemi-

cal industry that prompted the EPA to act. A 61-page EPA "preliminary risk assessment" links PFOA to rat pup deaths and delays in the sexual maturity and development of young rats whose mothers were exposed.

DuPont, the only large U.S. company using PFOA in its manufacturing processes, insists that its products are safe. DuPont argues that the data suggesting otherwise are based on extremely large doses given to rats, and there is no comparable human exposure.

"There's no known human health effects with PFOA," said Robert W. Rickard, director of the DuPont Haskell Laboratory for Health and Environmental Studies.

In connection with Monday's action, DuPont and other companies agreed to dramatically increase

company-sponsored research of PFOA health effects. But the Environmental Working Group, an activist group that does scientific research, said the EPA isn't acting fast enough.

"We give them 110 percent credit for starting this process," the group's senior scientist, Kris Thayer, said. "We think the risk picture is worse than EPA is saying today."

Thayer argued that some studies — included in an early version of the EPA's risk analysis but absent from Monday's document — link PFOA to prostate and testicular cancer in men.

EPA pollution program chief Charles Auer acknowledged that studies do link PFOA to cancer but said they need further examination and aren't the chief source of government concern.

Thayer said it's not hard to figure out how PFOA gets into the human bloodstream.

"You are eating these products because they are used in food packaging," Thayer said. "They're also used in fabric protection and leather production, so there's dermal contamination through the skin."

The Environmental Working Group sent a letter to EPA Administrator Christine Whitman last week accusing DuPont of hiding a 1981 study that linked PFOA to health problems in babies. DuPont vigorously denies the charge. Rickard said the environmental group misinterpreted the data. The EPA is investigating, Johnson said.

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